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Medical education

Sport as part of the medical humanities – why not?

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Medical humanities have become more and more an essential part of the medical education of future health practitioners. The goal (or at least the hope) of including medical humanities in the medical curriculum is that it can develop important skills essential to improving care. There is a consensus that medical humanities is an interdisciplinary field (including the humanities, social science and the arts) surrounding the practice of and the thinking about medicine, but there is no agreed definition of what medical humanities should be exactly, in neither substantive nor methodological terms.

There is a tension between those, on the one hand, who aim to bring different approaches from the fields of the humanities and the arts as tools to critically and creatively reflect on medicine and those, on the other hand, who wish to use different fields of study to shape the character and the moral attitudes of future health practitioners so that they will give better care. Proponents of the latter view have included in their medical curriculum courses such as visual art, theatre, dance classes and writing seminars in order to sharpen diagnostic skills and to foster insight into human nature, as well as enhance creativity, empathy, life skills and communication skills and even to “sustain the energy” of future medical practitioners (for examples, see [1, 2]).

Here, we want to raise the following question: if the latter view of medical humanities is endorsed – and there is a set of good reasons for that claim – shouldn't sport also be included in the medical curriculum? After all, sport could be a useful tool to foster better medical practitioners. Sports could be used not only as a means to teach and experience anatomy, but also as a way to develop a better physical feeling of oneself, which seems to be essential for someone in charge of helping ill and vulnerable bodies. Furthermore, physical training and exercise ensure the good health of medical practitioners themselves, and encourage the acquisition of a full range of skills that come with practicing a sport, such as team work, communication, endurance in stressful situations, etc.

O'Neill et al. have already suggested that, “there is an almost total neglect of sport and exercise in the literature of the humanities generally as well as that of the medical humanities,” [3] and that:

“This blindness towards an aspect of life which a range of philosophers have promoted as an a critical aspect of human development and insight, from Plato to modern times, is surprising, and particularly so given the enormous increase in interest in embodiment in the medical humanities. A further irony is that the claims of Huizunga and his followers that ‘sports and games could enhance the good life, promote the commonweal and provide insights into the riddles of the human condition’ bear a striking resemblance to the claims of some advocates for the medical humanities!” [3]

Therefore, since sport and medical humanities share the same goals, it seems appropriate to have a needed discussion about the role of sport in medical humanities and medical education in general. Moreover, even if only the former view of medical humanities is be endorsed (the “academic” view), sport could also be seen as an important part of medical humanities, or of learning in general. An athletic activity is often useful to clear someone’s mind and can therefore be beneficial for academic reflection. In this sense, sport could be considered an essential part to encourage academic reflection; in the same way a computer is a helpful and needed tool to write papers.

So, should athletic activities and sport become a mandatory requirement for the education of future medical practitioners? There are some strong reasons to think so, or at least to consider this possibility for the education of medical practitioners and the interdisciplinary field of medical humanities.

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